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THE SEARCH FOR HEALTH

A Report from
The National Institutes of Health
Bethesda, Maryland

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High Blood Cholesterol

Cholesterol is a blood fat that is essential for certain body functions, but too much blood cholesterol can result in build-up of deposits in the arteries which may lead to a heart attack. High blood cholesterol is another graded risk; that is, the person who has total cholesterol of 260 mg/dl is at greater risk of heart atack than is the person whose cholesterol is 220 mg/dl (mg/dl means miligrams of cholesterol per deciliter of blood; a deciliter is 1/10 of a liter or about 1/10 of a quart).

Although the relationship of high blood cholesterol to the increased risk of heart attack has been well known for some time, it was not proven until recently that reducing blood cholesterol will also reduce the risk of heart attack. The results of a recent clinical study, involving patients with substantial elevations of blood cholesterol, showed conclusively that lowering elevated blood cholesterol effectively lowers the risk of heart attack. For every 1 percent that the cholesterol level was reduced, the risk of heart attack was reduced by 2 percent. The person who reduced blood cholesterol by 25 percent potentially cut the risk of having a heart attack in half.

If blood cholesterol is elevated, steps should be taken to bring it down. The first method is to modify diet. Limit intake of saturated (animal) fat found in foods such as butter, whole milk, cheese and fatty red meats. Limit your intake of cholesterol-rich foods like egg yolks and organ meats. Eat more poultry with skin removed and fish. If you eat beef, pork or lamb, trim off the fat and bake or broil it so that fat drains away from the meat. Read food labels so that polyunsaturated fats can be substituted for saturated fats, where possible.

Polyunsaturated fats come from vegetable sources such as sunflower, corn or safflower oils. A registered dietitian can help a person achieve changes in food choices and preparation to best reduce blood cholesterol level.

Some people with high blood cholesterol may not be able to lower it enough through diet and exercise and may need to be placed on cholesterol-lowering drugs.

Americans are changing their habits and their lifestyles, and they are reaping rewards for these behavior changes. They are exercising more and have changed their dietary habits; per capita food consumption has changed. Since 1963, per capita consumption of whole milk is down 16 percent, use of butter and eggs is down 38 percent and 17 percent respectively, and the eating of animal fats and oils is down 39 percent. During this same time period, intake of vegetable fats and oils is up 63 percent.

In addition, a decline is seen in the absolute number of deaths due to heart disease. This decrease emphasizes the fact that prevention of heart attacks and improved medical care are resulting in great progress against heart disease. By controlling risk factors—cigarette smoking, high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol—the number of heart attacks will continue to decrease.

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